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Researching Researchers: Meeting Changing Researcher Needs in a Special Collections Environment

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Researching Researchers: meeting changing researcher needs in a special collections environment

Abstract

In the competitive Higher Education environment, it is no longer sufficient for special collections to rely on the 'uniqueness' of a collection as its unique selling point – it must be supported by a service and strategic plan that is both proactive in anticipating the demands of future researchers, and responsive to current researchers' changing needs. Edinburgh University's Centre for Research Collections (CRC) is addressing this challenge for the first time in a coordinated manner, employing a suite of research methods that allow staff to take an evidence based approach to service development and strategic planning. These include ethnographic observation, structured surveys, object-based learning initiatives, comprehensive data interrogation and active engagement with the University's academic schools. This paper examines how these approaches have been utilised in the development of CRC services, and its benefit to long-term planning.

Article

Edinburgh University's Centre for Research Collections (CRC) was established in 2008 as a primary point of access for the university's unique cultural and heritage collections. Located in the university's Main Library, it operates in a converged environment providing access to special collections (rare books, manuscripts, archives) and museum collections (primarily art and musical instruments). These two departments are part of the Library and University Collections division within the Information Services support group. In the 2015/16 academic year the CRC had 20,038 consultations of material, registered 896 new readers, received 7,342 enquiries and facilitated 97 seminars using collection materials.

In 2014 the special collections section was restructured with CRC User Services becoming one of four main teams, having previously been a sub-section of rare books and manuscripts. In addition to giving service delivery greater visibility amongst senior management, this resulted in a new post of Service Delivery Curator (later renamed CRC Services Manager) responsible for the review, strategic planning and development of services.

This case study explores the suite of methods that have been employed since 2014 to enable the CRC to take an evidence-based approach to operational planning and strategic development so that user services can be both responsive and proactive towards researchers' changing needs. The process was initiated by a six month Service Review that investigated the CRC's internal procedures and processes alongside its outward facing services.

Planning for CRC User Services is structured around the academic year, with priorities and plans mapped against the strategic priorities of both Information Services and the University. Managers create personalized plans for each team, and then combine them in to a high level plan for the CRC (covering both museums and special collections). The initial drafts provide opportunities for managers and senior managers to discuss where plans may conflict or where pooling resources could make activities more effective. As a result of the CRC Service Review, the CRC Users Services team also worked to an eighteen month Service Development Plan. The research methods described in this case study formed part of this.

User services in a special collections environment is examined in its broadest sense in *The Special Collections Handbook* (Cullingford 2011). Cullingford explores who special collection users are, how typical services are managed and what methods might be used to improve services. This broad view provided a professional and scholarly context for the CRC Service Review.

Other literature provides more specific examples of research methodologies adapted for the library environment. Madelin Evans developed an ethnographic observation system for assessing the relationship between the architecture and environment of reading rooms, and users' behaviour (Evans 2015) whereas Geoffrey Yeo used the commercial method of market segmentation as a model for understanding users (Yeo 2005). A recent article in this journal illustrated how models can be used in tandem to strengthen service development, in that instance the staff/space/collections dependency model combined with the Customer Service Excellence framework (Wickham 2015). The enormous variety of research methodologies available highlights the complex challenge facing service managers: 'users and their needs are multifarious, and gaining an understanding of them is likely to be a process of some complexity' (Yeo 2005).

The CRC Service Review began with an assessment of the data and statistics currently collected and how these were used for planning. It is tempting to gather as much information as possible but 'keeping statistics is a balance between the data that is practical to gather, and data that will be useful. There is no point in creating a complex system that no one has time to complete properly' (Cullingford 2011). For many years the CRC had kept basic statistics measuring reading room consultations, internal / external enquiries, number of new reader registrations and number of seminar room bookings. Additionally, curatorial staff provided basic reports on cataloguing, purchases, donations and conservation.

Though this data provided simple numeric statistics that could be compared year on year, its value was limited and did little to support the forward planning and prioritization of activities such as cataloguing, conservation, digitization and service development. The consultation records were further limited by the analogue recording methods that could not be searched. Before undertaking any changes, the requirements for the forthcoming Archives and Museums accreditation rounds were carefully considered. Two priorities were identified: the introduction of a digital method of recording reading room consultations and sourcing more detailed information about new users.

A digital method for recording reading room consultations was introduced with the use of an Excel spreadsheet. The spreadsheet is divided into months and consultations are categorized according to collection 'type' (printed, manuscript, university archive, Lothian Health Services Archive (LHSA), museum objects). This not only automatically generates monthly totals, but formulas allow more specific statistics to be recorded. The spreadsheet was introduced in September 2015 and is simple yet effective. The Laing Collection for example had 596 consultations, 3.12% of the total consultations for the year. This is important evidence as it is one of the University's most significant manuscript collections yet it is not fully catalogued online and requires substantial rehousing – this data can support future bids for project funding.

The end of year report also highlighted what data is missing or needs to be improved. For example, collecting data by prefix tells us very little about the usage of rare book collections that follow a sequence of alphabetical or numerical shelfmarks rather than having one singular prefix. Additionally, some of the archive prefixes such as 'Gen.' and 'Coll-' cover hundreds of different distinct collections so the data is not detailed enough. This is a key area to work on for 2016/7, however the search function in Excel does at least allow for the searching of keywords such as a collection's name.

To gather more detailed information about new service users, a detailed registration form was introduced from August 2015 to July 2016. The information provided by previous users had been limited to contact details and the signing of a declaration to abide by the regulations. The new form was split into two parts: University of Edinburgh members (mainly staff and students) and non-members (external readers including SCONUL). The registration form included categories such as type of user (undergraduate, postgraduate, academic staff, family historian, independent researcher / scholar), how the user heard about the CRC, country of origin (external users only), College group (University of Edinburgh only) and the subject of study. This data was inputted into a spreadsheet that could be used to apply formulas.

The registration data has provided key evidence that will be used to plan service delivery. For the first time, it has been possible to plot the volume of registrations per month, comparing internal and external users (Figure 1). For the university, spikes in registration occur in October, February and March. It indicates that students and academic staff are coming to the CRC after they have established their work during the semester and are planning end of semester assignments. The registration of undergraduate students specifically peaked in October and February; these students often need the most support so user services staff can now be better prepared to help them. October, February and March also coincide with the months during which the CRC experiences highest demand for collections-based seminars. For the user services team, this will help with planning annual leave and curatorial project support. In contrast, external registrations spiked in October, November, January and July. This suggests that visiting researchers (primarily academic staff and postgraduates) are visiting at times when their workload at their home institution is likely to be lower, allowing them to travel for research.

The question 'How did you hear about the Centre for Research Collections' verified anecdotal evidence that many users attend the CRC after finding a rare book on DiscoverEd, the library's main discovery point for print collections and e-resources. However a significant number of users discovered the manuscript collections through Archives Hub, the national online search engine, rather than the university's own archives catalogue (<http://archives.collections.ed.ac.uk>). This is an area of concern as all new archive and manuscript cataloguing is not necessarily exported to Archives Hub. It is also an example of how service delivery data interrogation has implications for all teams in the department.

The registration form data for 15/16 proved useful for suggesting improvements to services and staff planning requirements. It also provided meaningful evidence to use when advocating at a senior management level; the University has an international priority and 38% of CRC users were from outside the UK. However it was also a laborious process. For users, the registration form increased the amount of time they had to wait before accessing material. For staff, it required a lot of time to input the data

before any interrogation could begin. During the 16/17 academic year, Information Services has introduced a new form of registration for external users which will allow all users (whether internal or external) to have a patron account on the library management platform, Alma by Ex Libris. It is hoped that, by flagging patrons as registered at the CRC, this data can be automatically generated.

With the decision to discontinue lengthy registration forms, twice yearly structured surveys have been put in place to gauge users' attitudes towards the service. This is arranged centrally by the User Services team and collection managers can request additional questions to be added if required – having one survey prevents 'survey fatigue' (Cullingford 2011). The surveys are held in May and October for a period of two weeks at a time. All users are asked to complete one survey form.

The survey has eleven questions covering topics such as user confidence at handling material, the reading room environment, how the user requested their material, how they heard about the collections and which catalogues they looked at to support their research. They were also asked how satisfied they were with individual service elements such as opening hours, physical access to the building, and availability and attitude of staff.

The May 2016 survey findings provided practical information about where the service is thriving and where further development is needed. Overall satisfaction was 96% (Table 1) and the survey showed that the CRC has a high level of repeat visitors (81% had visited two times or more in the last three years with 27% visiting more than ten times). User confidence when handling collections material was high, contradicting staff anecdotal evidence; the measures taken to address this are considered in the section below on ethnographic observation.

A clear area for development was self-service ordering of collections material online. 53% of users requested their items in person at the CRC reception desk, and 47% ordered by emailing the CRC. The evidence from these surveys will be used to support a major project for the 17/18 academic year to

digitize the management of consultations at the CRC, from point of request online to the issuing of items in the reading room.

As with other Universities, the University of Edinburgh is experiencing increased demand on its library and information technology services, particularly the provision of study space in the Main Library and central campus. In Spring 2016 the Main Library created a User Experience (UX) group to carry out ethnographic research for the building's masterplan group to ensure that all improvements to facilities and spaces are evidence-based. Participating staff are from a range of departments across Information Services and have used the tools taught at the UXLib conferences and training days (<http://uxlib.org/>). For the CRC, more specific tools were found in Evans' recent research, published in *Archives & Records* (Evans, 2015). For her research into the correlation between reading room environment and architecture, and readers' behaviour, Evans created a matrix for observing handling in reading rooms. This focused on handling, how tidy a users' desk was, whether they used book supports for bound volumes and how they handled loose leaf material.

Since the opening of the CRC reading room, the user services team had noticed an increase in problematic behaviour that correlated with increased consultation numbers. This suggested that users were not following the handling guidelines listed in the regulations on the registration form. To address this, staff and volunteers applied Evans' matrix to observe handling behaviours in the reading room. A total of thirty users were observed on five different occasions. These observations highlighted some key areas for improvement: incorrect use of book supports for bound volumes; disordering of loose leaf material; allowing material to hang over the edge of desks; and leaving loose items of clothing on desks or the backs of chairs.

It was acknowledged by the CRC user services team that asking users to read a list of regulations at point of registration was not an effective way of preventing these issues occurring. Professionally designed

infographic posters were suggested as a more effective solution; these could be placed on the desks in the reading room and presented as a larger poster to users before entering the room. CRC staff had observed such posters at other reading rooms including the Weston Library, University of Oxford. The graphic design team within Information Services was provided with nine key messages to work in to infographics (Table 2). When the finished posters are installed further observational studies will be carried out to assess their effectiveness.

The development of CRC services relies on the collaborative working approach of all staff in special collections and museums, as well as colleagues in the wider Library & University Collections division. The object-based learning initiative is a key example of the benefits of the CRC Services Manager's role in supporting and coordinating the various activities being carried out by curatorial staff. In 2014 the Art Collections Curator worked with colleagues in Central St Martins and University College London to create an object-based learning questionnaire to be completed by all students attending seminars using collection items. This asked students about their attitudes towards object-based learning, its benefits, the skills employed and how it compared with more traditional learning routes such as lectures and reading.

The questionnaire was designed for art and history of art students but at the CRC it was rolled out to all seminars in which collection items were used - this included those delivered by CRC staff and seminars delivered by university academic staff. For students attending weekly seminars for a full semester, they were asked to complete a questionnaire in their first and last seminars.

198 responses were received during the 2014/15 academic year. The free text responses provided by students were overwhelmingly positive:

"Seeing the drawings in their real state gives insight into how the drawings were composed in terms of drawing techniques and materials. The archives material shows projects and proposals that were not

realised and are therefore hard to find on internet sources. The drawings are easier to study, looking at digital images means I often overlook detail." (1st year UG, Architecture)

"OBL enabled me to appreciate the documents on a material level, discussed binding, papers, glue, corrosion, not just content." (3rd year UG, History)

Questions 5 and 6 asked students to list the positives and negatives associated with this type of learning (Table 3). The students' responses to these questions provided the most valuable evidence with which to improve and develop the seminar facilities and learning experiences at the CRC. Lack of confidence in handling items and finding collection resources independently were clear concerns.

To mediate these concerns, a CRC User Guide has been developed in printed and pdf format. It provides basic introductory information and addresses some of the frequently asked questions about how to request material and taking photographs. The leaflet is handed out to all students attending seminars at the CRC and is also distributed at outreach events promoting the CRC collections. The CRC Services Manager has also taken a proactive approach to encouraging academic staff to teach best handling process; they can use either the online handling video that was filmed by the CRC or a member of the CRC User Services team can provide a simple introduction at the beginning of any seminar.

The nature of special collection and museum research means that researchers often require support from CRC staff but students are often reluctant to ask for help as Information Services prioritizes a self-service, online approach. The CRC User Services team has worked to improve their approachability, by welcoming students when they arrive for seminars and encouraging them to ask for help. Anecdotally, the team has seen greater numbers of undergraduate students approaching user services staff for support after attending collections-based seminars. This support can be simple and quick, such as finding an item in a printed catalogue, or more complex including support for undertaking literature searches for dissertation topics in the collections.

The feedback collected from students supported internal funding bids for a new semi-permanent wall to be used for teaching with the art collection (previously, artworks could only be laid flat on tables due to glass walls without hanging facilities) and new AV equipment which allows staff to use high resolution images online alongside original material.

The role of CRC Services Manager includes a remit to increase the use of collections for teaching by engaging with academic staff. This began with the CRC Service Review and has been supported by the library's Academic Support Librarians (ASLs). Engaging with academic staff can be challenging and, in another example of collaborative working, the ASLs provided knowledge and expertise about who to contact in which School or College within the University. One-to-one meetings with academic staff who currently, or previously, used the CRC collections followed this. Such meetings provoked discussions about how the collections were being used, what research formats resulted from this work, and what was needed to improve the facilities and services on offer at the CRC. Though time consuming, face-to-face meetings have proven a more effective way to engage with teaching staff; sending out surveys or emails is ineffective due to the enormous volume of communications and requests that staff receive on a daily basis. They also encourage the development of inter-personal relationships that are key to promoting new or improved services.

The consultation with academic staff provided a list of specific areas to focus on with regards to service improvement and strategic development: online cataloguing of Medieval manuscripts; proposed introductory outreach events around campus; value of academic and curatorial staff delivering teaching collaboratively; and the value of curatorial and operational support when planning new course modules. The last two points were already being carried out effectively by CRC staff at all levels.

The need for online cataloguing of the Medieval manuscripts was further supported by data from the CRC digital daybook and the lists of items used for teaching in seminars. It is a heavily used collection,

but academic staff often use the same manuscripts each academic year as it is difficult to know what else is available. This evidence has moved the Medieval manuscripts up the cataloguing priority list and will be the focus of a major cataloguing project beginning in 16/17 academic year. Once cataloguing is complete, the resource will be promoted to academic staff and researchers within the University and around the world.

A number of outreach activities were carried out in partnership with the CRC's Student Engagement Officer, with ASLs providing advice about potential venues contacts. Three pop-up events were held. The first two were located in the Schools of History, Classics and Archaeology (HCA), and Literature, Languages and Cultures (LLC). The HCA event was marketed as a two-hour pop up where students and staff could come along to the common room to learn about CRC collections, services and facilities. The event had a low turnout so the LLC event was reframed and marketed as an opportunity to ask staff specific questions relating to their research and courses. It was held in the School's departmental library, later in the semester when students were further on in their research. Though the number of attendees was still low, the value of their experience was much higher. They came with specific questions and needs, such as how to browse images online or how to navigate the different catalogues available. This made them more confident when visiting the CRC for the first time.

The third outreach event was at Edinburgh College of Art as part of *Bookmarks Artist Book and Zine Fair*. The CRC was invited to host a table at the fair, and to provide a talk on the collections as part of the series of lectures that took place before the fair opened. Participating in an existing event made this activity highly effective in terms of outreach. It provided an interested audience of students and staff from across Scotland, and the lecture allowed us to provide guidance and advice about how the collections could be used by practice-based researchers. The success of this event has led staff to focus outreach activities on existing events where the time and planning required is of most value.

Service development, and operational and strategic planning are a process of continuous improvement. There is no end point at which the task is complete nor is there a finite number of research methods to suit it. The methods employed above reflect a specific point in time and respond to contemporary needs facing special collections. The broader academic library sector changes quickly as it responds to teaching and research developments, and service providers must be ready to take on that challenge.

Having evidence to hand is a key part of taking on these challenges. With different services competing for limited resources, library professionals need to be ready to prove the value of new systems, services, facilities and staff. This case study has shown how successful an evidence-based approach can be, with successful bids for new teaching facilities and changes to cataloguing prioritization.

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Researching Researchers: meeting changing researcher needs in a special collections environment

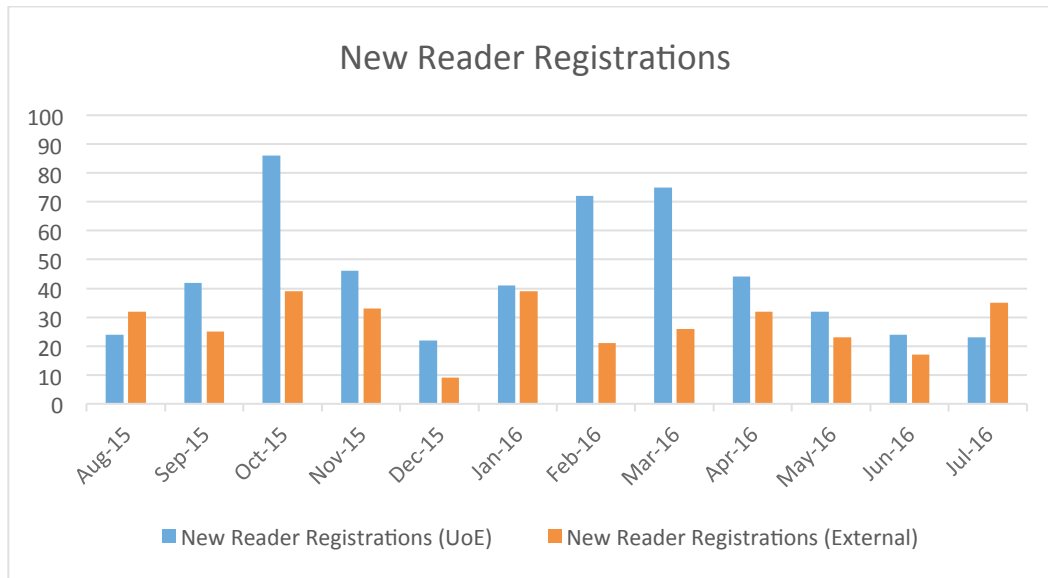


Figure 1: comparison of internal and external new reader registrations for 15/16 academic year.

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	Opening hours	Ease to find us	Appearance/upkeep	Access to/in building	Lockers/Toilet/rest area	Welcome reception	Availability of staff	Attitude of staff	Quality of staff's advice	Collection times	
Very satisfied	11	20	19	17	19	20	20	20	21	11	178
Fairly satisfied	10	3	6	8	5	6	5	5	4	0	52
Neither	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	2	7
Not very satisfied	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Not at all satisfied	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Don't know/NA	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	22	24	26	26	25	26	25	25	26	13	

Table 1: user satisfaction results from May 2016 reader feedback survey.

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Do not remove any collection items from the Reading Room	Leave bags (including laptop and table cases) and coats in the lockers provided	No pens, pencil cases, food or drink in the reading room
Do not leave items of clothing on the backs of chairs or desks – please place them in the lockers provided	Use book supports for bound volumes	Use allocated desks when consulting loose leaf material
Keep loose leaf archive material in order and do not allow documents to hang off the edge of the table	Please ask staff before taking any photographs – some of our items may not be photographed	Please make sure all devices, including telephones, are muted

Table 2: nine key security and preservation messages for reading room users

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Positive	Negative
Enjoyed tactile way of learning	Difficult to see items in large classes
Learnt how to safely handle historic items	Nervous about handling items
Could appreciate colour and texture of material	Limited space for store visits to see large items
Encouraged the class to work as a group / team	Not confident about how to reference items afterwards
Provoked discussion and questions	Not confident about how to consult items themselves
More dynamic due to moving around the room	Can be difficult to find items which are relevant
Where collection curators were involved, they appreciated having expert knowledge on hand	Can't work at their own pace

Table 3: summary of positive and negative experiences associated with object-based learning.